

# The Need For Student Evaluation of Instruction in Japanese University English Departments

Suzanne Yonesaka

## I. Introduction

When native-speaker English instructors begin teaching at Japanese universities, many are surprised at how much freedom they have in their classrooms. University faculty are generally careful not to impinge on other instructors' perceived territory and expect, of course, that their own classroom boundaries will be likewise respected. But after some time, the disadvantage of completely private classrooms becomes apparent: it is difficult to get feedback. Feedback means the verbal or nonverbal signals, both positive and negative, that help instructors fine-tune their teaching. In principle, teachers have four sources of feedback: administrators, colleagues, students, and themselves.

Established feedback systems have generally not been well-developed in Japan, so university instructors are almost never observed while teaching, either by administrators or by colleagues. Administrative feedback, if any, tends to be concerned with the mechanics of overall curriculum needs without specific reference to the quality of teaching. To get feedback from their colleagues, some concerned teachers (especially native-speakers who are familiar with the concept) collaborate in observing each others' classrooms. Unfortunately, this is not always practical because of extremely tight teaching schedules, in other countries as well as in Japan. For example, in a major study of 300 ESL teachers in Australia (Nunan, 1988, p. 147), "many teachers nominated team-teaching [taking turns teaching and observing] as the most valuable means of professional self-development, and yet relatively few had ever actually taken part in a team-teaching exercise".

The third source of feedback is self-monitoring, which is done by all instructors to some degree. Instructors may simply react to their teaching ("Gee, that idea really worked well!") without exploring *why*, or they may jot down their reflections in a personal teaching journal. They may use audio or video equipment to record lessons in order to see more clearly what is going on in their classrooms. Or they may use an in-depth self-observation system such as Fanselow's FOCUS (Fanselow, 1987) to get much more sophisticated feedback.

The complexities of peer- and self-monitoring are beyond the scope of this paper, which focusses instead on the most constant and direct type of feedback

of all – student feedback. A sea of confused or enlightened faces, questions, test scores, passing comments – all are valid and important sources. Many instructors, both native-speaker and Japanese, elicit further feedback through short informal questionnaires at the end of the year asking questions such as “Did you enjoy this class?” But one problem is that these questionnaires might be limited in scope: even well-intentioned instructors may unconsciously avoid questions about their Achilles’ heels. For example, an instructor who does not use realia would probably not elicit opinions about their use. The results may be further distorted by the instructor’s own ego: exactly how does one interpret the results? But most importantly, it is difficult to see trends, to build on this information, and to link this with feedback from other classes and from other sources.

The first step in solving these problems can be the systematic use of valid student ratings of instruction. (For an example of a student-rating-of-instruction form, see Appendix.) Although the use of student ratings is a recent development in Europe (De Neve and Janssen, 1982) and is still in the birthing stages in Japan, in the United States the systematic evaluation of instruction by students has a surprisingly long and well-researched history.

From West Coast to East Coast, over half of all private and public colleges and universities in America use student ratings to collect evaluations of instruction. . . And the half-century of student ratings has been paralleled by a half-century of research into them, with the last decade seeing the area as among the most researched in the field (producing literally thousands of papers). (Tracey, 1985, p. 2)

Unfortunately, partly because this research is not widely known in the EFL field, the issue of student ratings has received very little attention in Japan. Some native-speaker instructors may be familiar with student ratings only because they have rated their own professors, and most Japanese instructors have not had even that experience. In order to bring the concept of student ratings to the attention of the Japanese EFL community, this paper will explore some basic issues: the validity of student ratings; the question of what to do with the results; and the feasibility of their use in Japan.

## II. How Valid are Student Evaluations of Instruction?

Broadly speaking, the validity of student ratings may be approached from two fundamentally different views. In one view, student ratings are valid if they accurately reflect students’ opinions about the quality of instruction, regardless of whether ratings reflect what students learn. . . In the second view, student ratings are valid if they accurately reflect instructional effectiveness. . . (Abrami et al., 1990, p. 219)

The second, far more complex view, requires an operative definition of learning, involving the questions of input vs. intake, long- and short-term memory, the effect of instruction on motivation, and so on. This paper's view is that student ratings are valid if they accurately reflect the satisfaction of the students who are the consumers of the teaching process.

When confronted with student ratings of instruction, many instructors express certain recurring misperceptions. Although these fears may not be expressed in statistical terminology, they actually question the internal and construct validity of student ratings. This section will summarize some of the major research findings on these types of validity.

### A. Internal Validity

Student evaluations of teaching effectiveness can be very threatening to instructors who feel they may be just popularity contests. Some instructors fear that students will evaluate according to superficial criteria, such as the instructor's gender, looks or voice quality. Others fear that students will consistently rate certain subjects or certain class formats higher or lower than others, regardless of teaching quality. These fears that *something else besides teaching performance is being rated* raise questions about the *internal validity* of student ratings. For this reason, much of the research into student ratings has been concerned with isolating and testing for factors that "contaminate" ratings. These factors generally fall into three categories, format-related, instructor-related, and instrument-related. Some of the research is contradictory, but following are a few generalizations based mainly on an overview of the field by Schwier (1982).

#### 1. Format-related threats to validity.

*Smaller or larger classes receive better ratings than medium-sized classes.* Although many instructors assume that students automatically give larger classes lower ratings, actually it is the medium-sized classes (30 - 39 Ss) that get lower ratings. In fact, language classes of this size seem fairly common in Japan, and are often considered small; nevertheless, the difficulties involved controlling the group dynamics may result in lower ratings.

*Required classes may be rated lower than elective classes.* Although some research shows that there is no difference, until more conclusive results are found, it may be wise to assume that students tend to rate compulsory classes lower than elective classes.

*The level of the class (eg. Eng. 102 or Eng. 202) or the level of the students (eg. Fr. or So.) does not affect ratings.* (Suchner, 1985) However, we may posit that students actually become better and better at rating their instructors as they become familiar with the questionnaire format and experience various types of teaching.

*There may be some differences in the student ratings of different academic fields.* Fields that require mathematical aptitude or fields that are

taught sequentially – as are many EFL classes – may receive lower ratings. (Cashin, date unknown)

## 2. Instructor-related threats to validity.

*There is no significant difference between the ratings of men and women teachers, or between ratings made by male and female students.* Student or instructor gender has been found not to be significant in ratings.

*Teachers who exhibit personality traits of warmth, culture, and leadership may receive higher ratings.* The question of personality differences is a delicate one, coming dangerously close to the “well, I got low ratings because they don’t like my tie,” myth. However, along with *flexibility* and *intellectual curiosity*, the above personality traits seem to be significant factors recurring in the literature. More interestingly, Murray et al. (1990, p.259) found very clear evidence that “the specific personality traits contributing to effective teaching varied substantially for different types of courses” and that “perceived teaching effectiveness does in fact vary substantially across types of courses [eg. lecture, seminar] for the same instructor.” They concluded that “one of the secrets of effective teaching, therefore, is to discover the conditions under which one teaches most effectively.”

*Actual or anticipated grades do not appear to affect instructor ratings.* Although some studies have found weak relationships, “the inconsistency of findings suggests that grades are NOT a significant factor.” (Schwier, 1982, p.30) This area certainly needs further research.

## 3. Instrument-related threats to validity.

The validity of student ratings is also questioned by the belief that as active participants in a complex social event, students are not able to disentangle themselves enough to give an honest, unbiased evaluation that reflects the overall reality of classroom events. Some instructors fear that even if the items in their evaluation instrument are carefully constructed and weighted, the students may not be able to discriminate among them, or that their responses to different questions might simply reflect a halo effect of a single underlying impression. (For example, if an instructor is chronically disorganized, students might tend to rate him or her lower on all items, even items that don’t ask about organization.) In reality, a large body of research indicates that this does not happen.

Regarding the validity of both component constructs and summary measures, there seems to be consistent evidence that students can and do discriminate among the constructs they are asked to report, and that multiple questions designed to measure the same construct can be developed that evidence convergence on these constructs and agreement with other forms of evaluation. (Suchner, 1985, p. 5)

## B. Construct Validity

An often-voiced objection to student evaluations is that “the multi-

dimensional character of teaching effectiveness can only be approximately encompassed within a brief questionnaire.” (McBean and Lennox, p. 645) Some instructors may feel that as each class is unique, it cannot be analyzed into a set of standard elements or simplifying abstractions. Such objections call *face validity* and *construct validity* into question. Face validity—the logical appeal of the items—seems to be fairly easy to establish. “There seems to be general agreement on the characteristics of effective teaching; student surveys and a review of teacher-rating instruments identified similar criteria. . . [and there is] considerable redundancy in a wide sampling of instruments used by different universities in North America.” (Schwier, 1982, p. 29)

Construct validity—clearly defining the psychological constructs of effective teaching—is much more difficult to establish. However, the large amount of research done in this area shows that constructs that have been found to be measureable are: stimulation of interest; clarity and understandability; knowledge of the subject matter; preparation for and organization of the course; and enthusiasm for the subject matter and for teaching. (Feldman, in Suchner, 1985, p. 5) Thus, questionnaires with multiple questions on each of these five constructs probably have fairly high construct validity. Other constructs (friendliness; respect and concern for the students; helpfulness and availability to students; openness to other people’s opinions) while still respected by students as characteristics of the superior teacher are not particularly predictive of students’ overall evaluations of teaching effectiveness. (ibid.) Of course, there is still much work to be done in this area. It would be especially interesting to see if these constructs are weighted somewhat differently in Japan. For example, “respect and concern for the students” may have a fairly high predictive power in the Japanese context.

This section has attempted to refute some commonly-held misperceptions that question the validity of student ratings of instruction. All in all,

. . . it is well-documented that teaching quality is the single major factor in student ratings. . . Students generally agree greatly in their ratings of a given class and their ratings correlate with various other measures of teaching effectiveness—including alumni ratings [which ask students to rate their instructors several years after graduating] and measures of student learning. (Tracey, 1985, p. 2)

Of course, this does not mean that all student-rating-of-instruction forms are automatically valid. It is up to the administrators to ensure reasonably high validity through careful construction and administration of the questionnaires.

### III. Utilizing the Data

“[In North America] historically information from student evaluations of university and college instructors has been used in three ways: for tenure and

promotion decisions, for improvement of instruction, and for student course selection.” (Wilson, 1988, p. 79) In Japan, however, it will probably be a long time before instruction quality is considered to be a major factor in tenure decisions. And because of curriculum constraints, Japanese students do not often have the luxury of choosing one instructor over another as students in North America do. So the most important use for student evaluations in Japan will be improvement of instruction.

This means that a support system for teaching improvement must already be in place even before the questionnaires are administered. There is nothing more discouraging than being told that a certain behavior is ineffective without being offered an alternative behavior pattern. “Weaknesses will not seem as threatening if ideas for improvement can be identified immediately.” (Schwier, 1982, p.33) These ideas need not, indeed should not, come from on high as prescriptive rules. Ideas need to come from the instructors themselves as they network with other instructors in a non-threatening way.

Unfortunately, the reality of the situation in Japan is that most tenured professors are extremely busy with committees and research. Part-time instructors have very little contact with the full-time staff. And all instructors are used to total autonomy in their classrooms. It is fairly obvious that constructive networking will not occur very easily without some sort of system to promote it.

One such system might be the pairing up of teachers who scored low in a given area with teachers who received high ratings in that area. For example, if Instructor A was ranked poorly in the area of “feedback”, she can be paired up with Instructor B who was rated highly in that area. After observing one of Instructor B’s classes for use of feedback, and some discussion, Instructor A will have a clearer idea of her goals. At the same time, Instructor B might be paired up with Instructor C to help him improve his “examinations”, and so on. In this way, instructors will get immediate, pertinent input in one particular problem area without wasting a lot of time and emotional energy. And many instructors will have the chance to feel good about having their strengths recognized and about helping a colleague out.

This is only one way that the data from the questionnaire could be used. The point is that for student evaluation-of-teaching questionnaires to have any meaning, the data *must be used*: if the results are simply filed away, then nothing has been achieved. The initiation of evaluation-of-teaching questionnaires also implies the installment of some sort of teaching improvement system.

#### IV. Is Japan Ready for Student Ratings of Instruction ?

At this point in time, although some individual instructors are using personally-developed student-rating forms to improve their teaching,

departmental use of questionnaires is extremely limited in Japan. However, given that the Ministry of Education recently recommended that universities and junior colleges be allowed to develop their own curriculum and personnel guidelines, and given the increasing competition among Japanese universities as the university-age population starts its long decline, it is possible that many universities in Japan will eventually begin to use student-ratings.

Certain objections, stemming partially from the *nihonjinron* (the question of what it means to be Japanese) phenomenon, can be anticipated. Some of the objections – student ratings may work in other countries but not in Japan; the Japanese university system is intrinsically different; it is not necessary to improve the quality of Japanese university teaching because student expectations are so low anyway – will be so vague that nobody will be able to disprove them.

This “But-Japan-is-Different” is a certain mode of thinking that recurs in various forms in various fields, and it is certainly beyond the scope and purpose of this paper to provide a rebuttal. That is not to say, however, that such objections are harmless; on the contrary, this way of thinking will probably prevent student evaluations from being implemented in some schools in the future. What we can hope for is that, after a trial period for student rating forms, these objections will be properly researched by the Japanese educational community and either be supported or laid to rest.

Another objection may be that Japanese students aren’t capable of cold-blooded evaluations. This may be true for on-the-spot evaluations, but given proper training throughout the year, the students will likely prove entirely capable of assessing their own education. This ties in with another possible objection: that Japanese hierarchical relationships couldn’t stand the stress of evaluations. The problem may lie more with the instructors than with the students. But again, ongoing assessment training throughout the year should help sensitize instructors to evaluation. Another way to soften the fault-finding aspect of evaluations is to word them in terms of future classes. By asking what the instructor could do next year to improve the class, it is then possible to extrapolate what was actually done in the present class. (Nunan, personal communication.) Student rating of instruction can work in Japan if it is perceived as a collective, mutually beneficial activity.

This paper has attempted to introduce the concept of student evaluations of teaching effectiveness to Japanese foreign-language university departments. Student evaluations are but one way to get feedback from students who are themselves but one source of feedback. Thus, it is important that student ratings not be seen as the definitive authority on teaching effectiveness, which would lead to exaggerated hopes or unfounded fears. However, along with other measures of teaching effectiveness such as peer- and self- observation, student ratings can be a valuable tool in the ongoing process of becoming better teachers.

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## APPENDIX

Instructor's Name:	<b>Higher Colleges Of Technology Dubai Men's College</b>
Course:	Date:

  

### Instructions

تعليقات: اقرأ الاسئلة بإمعان، ثم ضع علامة X  
Read the questions carefully, then put an X on the most appropriate box.

  

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# Higher Colleges Of Technology Dubai Men's College



Do not answer this question for Arabic or Islamic Studies

لا تجب على هذا السؤال لمادتي اللغة العربية و الدراسات الاسلامية

7

The teacher uses the English language at a level I understand.

يستخدم المدرس اللغة الانكليزية بمستوى افهم.

اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know

8

The things we do in class help me to learn.

النشاطات التي نقوم بها في الصف تساعدني على التعلم.

اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know

9

The teacher gives me a chance to ask questions and express my ideas freely.

يعطيني المدرس فرصة لطرح الاسئلة و التعبير عن افكاري بحرية.

اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know

10

The methods of evaluation (examinations, papers, projects, labs) are proper for this course.

طريقة التقييم (من امتحانات ، ابحاث، مشاريع، اعمال مخبرية) هي مناسبة لهذه المادة.

اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know

11

So far, I have been evaluated fairly and accurately.

حتى الان، لقد قيمت بدقة و عدل.

اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know

12

The teacher marks and returns tests/ assignments within a reasonable period of time.

يقوم المدرس بتصحيح الامتحانات و الواجبات و إعادتها في زمن مناسب.

اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know

13

The teacher discusses the tests/assignments with us after they have been marked.

يقوم المدرس بمناقشة الامتحانات و الواجبات معنا بعد تصحيحها.

اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't know

Higher Colleges Of Technology  
Dubai Men's College

14	The teacher cares for me and treats me respectfully. يبدي المدرس اهتماما بي و يعاملني باحترام.	اوافق بشدة Strongly agree	اوافق Agree	اعارض Disagree	اعارض بشدة Strongly disagree	لا ادرى I don't Know
15	The teacher is willing to help me to learn in class. المدرس مستعد لمساعدتي للتعلم في الصف	اوافق بشدة Strongly agree	اوافق Agree	اعارض Disagree	اعارض بشدة Strongly disagree	لا ادرى I don't Know
16	The teacher is willing to help me to learn outside the class. المدرس مستعد لمساعدتي للتعلم خارج الصف.	اوافق بشدة Strongly agree	اوافق Agree	اعارض Disagree	اعارض بشدة Strongly disagree	لا ادرى I don't Know
17	The instructor tries to make this course interesting. يحاول المدرس ان يجعل هذه المادة شيقة .	اوافق بشدة Strongly agree	اوافق Agree	اعارض Disagree	اعارض بشدة Strongly disagree	لا ادرى I don't Know
18	The instructor shows enthusiasm for the subject. يبدي المدرس حماسا في هذا الموضوع.	اوافق بشدة Strongly agree	اوافق Agree	اعارض Disagree	اعارض بشدة Strongly disagree	لا ادرى I don't Know
19	I learned well from this teacher. لقد تعلمت بشكل جيد من هذا الاستاذ.	اوافق بشدة Strongly agree	اوافق Agree	اعارض Disagree	اعارض بشدة Strongly disagree	لا ادرى I don't Know

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I would describe my teacher as:	20	يمكنني ان اصف المدرس/المدرسة كـ:															
friendly  knowledgeable in this subject  organized  reliable  having good class room control	<table border="0" style="margin: auto;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: right;">اوافق بشدة</td> <td style="text-align: right;">اوافق</td> <td style="text-align: right;">اعارض</td> <td style="text-align: right;">اعارض بشدة</td> <td style="text-align: right;">لا ادرى</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: right;">Strongly agree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Agree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Disagree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Strongly disagree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">I don't Know</td> </tr> </table>	اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't Know	ودود/ودودة  متمكن/متمكنة من هذه المادة  منظم/منظمة  يعتمد عليه/عليها  يستطيع/تستطيع السيطرة على مجريات الامور في الصف.
اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى													
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>													
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't Know													

  

21	In my opinion, this teacher is a good teacher.  برأىي، هذا المدرس جيد.	<table border="0" style="margin: auto;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: right;">اوافق بشدة</td> <td style="text-align: right;">اوافق</td> <td style="text-align: right;">اعارض</td> <td style="text-align: right;">اعارض بشدة</td> <td style="text-align: right;">لا ادرى</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: right;">Strongly agree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Agree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Disagree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">Strongly disagree</td> <td style="text-align: right;">I don't Know</td> </tr> </table>	اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't Know
اوافق بشدة	اوافق	اعارض	اعارض بشدة	لا ادرى													
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>													
Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I don't Know													

  

22	My attendance in this course has been : خلال هذا الفصل، كانت نسبة حضوري الصف هي:																
	<table border="0" style="margin: auto;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: right;">اكثر من 90%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">80%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">70%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">60%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">اقل من 60%</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> <td><input type="text"/></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: right;">more than 90%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">80%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">70%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">60%</td> <td style="text-align: right;">less than 60%</td> </tr> </table>	اكثر من 90%	80%	70%	60%	اقل من 60%	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	more than 90%	80%	70%	60%	less than 60%	
اكثر من 90%	80%	70%	60%	اقل من 60%													
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>													
more than 90%	80%	70%	60%	less than 60%													

  

Comments: Please make comments	ملاحظات: الرجاء ابداء أي ملاحظة او تعليق